



## LET'S HEAR IT FOR YOUR *Furry Friends!*

About 68% of U.S. households welcome the warmth and companionship of pets. In good times and bad, pets offer unconditional love. And the unconditional love of a pet can do more than keep you company. In fact, mounds of research reveal that living with pets can yield several health benefits. Studies have shown that pets can help lower blood pressure and anxiety, while boosting our minds and mood. Here's a closer look at some of these key benefits.

### ALLERGIES

It was once thought that if your family had a pet, children would be more likely to become allergic to the pet. And if you came from an allergy-prone family, pets should be avoided. However, a growing number of studies have suggested that kids growing up in a home with furry animals like a cat or dog will have less risk of allergies and asthma.

### AGING

Studies have shown that Alzheimer's patients have fewer anxious outbursts if there is an animal in the home. Their caregivers also feel less burdened when there is a pet, particularly if it is a cat, which generally requires less care than a dog. Moreover, walking a dog or just caring for a pet, for elderly people who are able, can provide exercise and companionship.

### STRESS & MOOD

Research has shown that pet owners with AIDS are far less likely to suffer from depression than those without pets. In one study, stockbrokers with high blood pressure who adopted a cat or dog had lower blood pressure readings in stressful situations than did people without pets.

Interacting with animals has been shown to decrease levels of cortisol (a stress-related hormone) and lower blood pressure. Other studies have found that animals can reduce loneliness, increase feelings of social support, and boost your mood.

### SOCIAL SUPPORT

Animals can serve as a source of comfort and support. Therapy dogs are especially good at this. They're sometimes brought into hospitals or nursing homes to help reduce patients' stress and anxiety.

Researchers are studying the safety of bringing animals into hospital settings because animals may expose people to more germs. A current study is looking at the safety of bringing dogs to visit children with cancer. Scientists

will be testing the children's hands to see if there are dangerous levels of germs transferred from the dog after the visit.

Dogs may also aid in the classroom. One study found that dogs can help children with ADHD focus their attention. Researchers enrolled two groups of children diagnosed with ADHD into 12-week group therapy sessions. The first group of kids read to a therapy dog once a week for 30 minutes. The second group read to puppets that looked like dogs.

Researchers will continue to explore the many health effects of having a pet. They're ultimately trying to find out what's working, what's not working, and what's safe—for both the humans and the animals.



### HEALTH RISKS FROM YOUR PET

Kids, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems are at greater risk for getting sick from animals. Take these steps to reduce your risk:

- » Wash your hands thoroughly after contact with animals.
- » Keep your pet clean and healthy, and keep vaccinations up to date.
- » Supervise children when they're interacting with animals.
- » Prevent kids from kissing their pets or putting their hands or other objects in their mouths after touching animals.
- » Avoid changing litter boxes during pregnancy. Problems with pregnancy may occur from exposure to toxoplasmosis, a parasitic disease spread through the feces of infected cats.